

Inserting librarians into the Canadian oral history conversation

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At last year's OHA keynote session, Doug Boyd¹ asked members of the audience to raise their hands when he called out their professional group. Who was a historian? An anthropologist? Gender studies? Finally, who was an archivist?

I'm an academic librarian, and I had a split second to decide whether or not to put my hand up. In the midst of a minor existential crisis, I raised my elbow to indicate that I self-identified as a preservationist, but there was a lot of "meaning" behind why my hand stayed at my shoulder. These reasons resonate quite strongly as a Canadian, where archivists--not librarians--played a leading role in oral history during the 1970s and 1980s.

In this presentation, I will discuss archivists' involvement in the early days of Canadian oral history and some interesting implications that their activity has had. I will then review some observations on oral history's current state, where academics dominate the field, and then explain why librarians are poised to have a stronger presence in the future.

Some might feel that I'm splitting hairs on this issue, or at the very least, overthinking it, so at this point that it would be useful to quickly distinguish the work archivists do from that of librarians. The *Merriam Webster* definition of an archive is "a place in which public **records** or historical materials (such as documents) are **preserved**" (Merriam-Webster.com., n.d.a). Take note of the terms "records" and "preserved;" archivists manage collections of unique unpublished materials: print and electronic communications created during the course of life or work. These materials

¹ Douglas Boyd is the Director of the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, which developed [OHMS](#), free indexing software for oral histories.

often have restrictions on access and reproduction due to privacy and copyright legislation.

On the other hand, librarians select and manage collections of works intended for publication, most typically books and periodicals. *Webster's* defines a library as "a place in which literary, musical, artistic, or reference materials...are **kept for use** but not for sale" (Merriam-Webster.com., n.d.b). With the exception of our Special Collections units, we do not restrict access to our collections because everything we own was intended for widespread use. Show us your library card and we'll hand you the keys to our collections.

1. The Past

First, let's talk about the past. Canadian ethnographers, folklorists, broadcasters, and cinematographers were conducting and preserving oral history interviews as early as the technology would allow it. (Lohead, 2015; MacDonald, 2005). We have preserved [thousands of recordings on wax cylinders](#) from interviews from 1899 to 1949 as well as interviews from our public broadcaster, the CBC, dating back to 1939. In 1969, twenty archivists who acquired and managed interview collections came together at the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, where they passed a motion to form a standing committee on oral history. Five years later, this group became an independent association--the Canadian Oral History Association, or COHA--with the intention "to include practitioners of oral history outside of archives and history departments." (La Clare, 1976). COHA was, from its earliest days, an organization that welcomed members from a wide range of disciplines and professions.

COHA's executive were engaged in strengthening the oral history network and, true to their calling as information professionals, creating an inventory of Canadian collections. Their 1970s era conferences included presentations from prominent historians, archivists, journalists, and broadcasters. In 1971 COHA also published an initial survey of Canadian oral history projects, which revealed an initial count of 68 collections across the country (Delisle, 1971). They expanded the inventory in 1993 with their publication of *The Guide to Oral History Collections in Canada*, a resource that lists over 1800 collections held across the country (Fortier & Canadian Oral History Association, 1993).

Furthermore, the British Columbia Archives supported an Aural History Division with the mandate to acquire and preserve all aspects of the province's heritage. Starting in 1972, this department interviewed or commissioned interviews with individuals underrepresented in their archives.

They also published the journal [*Sound Heritage*](#), a supplement to their recordings, which included transcripts and articles that provided context to the recordings. *Sound Heritage* published special issues from a wide spectrum of British Columbians, including residential school survivors, mountaineers, urban immigrant residents, forestry workers, and labour activists.

However, not all archivists approved of actively collecting oral histories (Lohead, 2015). The Association of Canadian Archivists argued that the archivist's role was to **preserve** but not to **create** records. Jean Dryden of the Provincial Archives of Alberta had further concerns about the quality of oral history interviews; she dismissed the practice as "simply finding someone who is suitably ancient, setting up the nearest tape recorder, and letting him or her ramble on and reminisce at will" (Dryden, 1982). Derek Reimer from the BC Archives countered that "[a]rchivists who want to refuse the legitimacy of oral history as a method of historical documentation are acting as the gatekeepers of the bastion of conservatism, elitism and privilege" (Reimer, 1982, p. 82). Richard Lohead, who was Head of the National Archives' Visual and Sound Division, proposed a compromise for archivists to educate people to use best practices in conducting, collecting, and preserving interviews. Dryden countered that archives were not funded to support such programs (Lohead, 2015).

This debate coincides with the increased professionalism of archival practice. The first North American graduate program of archival studies was established at the University of British Columbia in 1981, which was modeled on accredited librarian training programs (Bolotenko, 1983, p. 23). Professional programs marked a rupture in the tradition of PhD historian-archivists; archival school increased the emphasis on impartiality as well as systemized the rules of description, appraisal, and acquisition. George Bolotenko's essay "Archivists and historians: keepers of the well" published in 1983 captures the tension between the ethos of archivists with History PhDs and the emerging graduates of archivists trained in professional programs. Bolotenko not only disapproved of but mocked proponents of professionalism such as Hilary Jenkinson and Margaret Cross Norton, who purportedly believed "the *raison d'être* of the archivist was to serve his employer, not the calling of history" (Bolotenko, 1983, p. 10; Jenkinson, 1937).

However, while Canadian archivists spent the early 1980s debating their engagement with oral history, governments began cutting back their funding. The Social Credit government in British Columbia adopted austerity measures which stripped archivists' ability to perform anything other than "core" archival practices (Lohead, 2015, p. 9); *Sound Heritage* published its

last issue in 1983. Federal cuts came later; the National Archives of Canada was merged with the National Library in 2004. By 2011, services and collections at Library and Archives Canada had declined to the point that the Canadian Association of University Teachers began a campaign to “save” the institution (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2011). This campaign did not sway the conservative Steven Harper government, which cut even further in 2012 (Groover, 2012).

Former COHA president Wilma MacDonald and archivist Richard Lohead have mused that the predominance of archivists in COHA’s early days may have ultimately had a negative impact. Lohead believes that the “focus on archival definition and legitimacy of oral history...may have prevented COHA from positioning itself to capture the widening appeal of oral history in the 1990s” (Lohead, 2015, p. 2). MacDonald questioned whether some of the archival methods used to house oral histories, such as describing collections by the interviewers’ name, their limited use of subject headings, and insistence on full contextual information, inhibited their use (MacDonald, 1990). She argued that academic libraries would be better suited to provide access to oral histories.

2. The Present

Moving toward the present, COHA came to the brink of dissolution in 1989 but continued under the leadership of archivist Wilma MacDonald. (MacDonald, 2005). The mid-1990s saw a shift in the COHA executive with the balance tipping from archivists to academics (MacDonald, 2005). Historian Alexander Freund elaborates on the successes and challenges contemporary Canadian oral historians have experienced in his 2015 article (Where?) Do Canadians Talk About Oral History? (Freund, 2015). He documents the efforts that he and his colleagues at the University of Winnipeg made to promote oral history in Canada: they established the Oral History Centre, co-edited the Canadian Oral History Reader, revived the *Oral History Forum*, and organized workshops and conferences, including one in 2015, which featured Alessandro Portelli.

The Oral History Centre is thriving, but Freund presents a bleak landscape of the Canadian oral history network and some aspects of modern practice. There is no longer a large or visible presence of oral historians at annual meetings of the Canadian Historical Association, and the Oral History Forum would benefit from more submissions from Canadian practitioners. He casts doubt on the viability of oral history and digital humanities, as academics need to devote their time to analysis rather than indexing and exhibition. He further raises ethical and legal implications of oral history interviews being

accessible on the internet. He would like COHA to “return to the multi-disciplinarity and cooperation with journalists and archivists that dominated the 1970s” (Freund, 2015, p. 8).

Despite the dearth of oral historians at CHA meetings, and the struggles of the *Forum*, Kristina Llewellyn and Dana Nowak’s Annotated Bibliography of Oral History in Canada: 1980 – 2012 (Llewellyn & Nowak, 2013) indicates that academics from a wide variety of disciplines are using oral history methods in their research. This bibliography of 215 scholarly works provides a rich representation of disciplines. Nobody doubts that Canadian researchers are doing valuable work creating new knowledge regarding diverse communities.

However, Llewellyn and Nowak’s bibliography focuses on the scholarly outputs of oral history, which is very different from COHA’s initial inventory of interview collections. An archivist or librarian would ask how many of the oral history interviews used as source material for the scholarly works listed in Llewellyn and Nowak are publicly accessible. I sampled Canadian masters and PhD theses using oral history as a method, and only 28% of the graduate students indicated where they archived their interviews for future use. (Hendrigan, 2016a). Ronald Grele has strong opinions on oral historians who do not preserve their interviews: “when interviewing is done for one’s own purposes with no intent to make the interviews public, to share them, and when they are kept from public scrutiny, it is not oral history” (Grele, 1993, p. 508). Since academic hiring and tenure & promotion committees value analysis so highly, COHA needs representation from archivists, museum curators, and librarians, to support preservation and access as well. We need to advocate for secondary data analysis and minimize the amount of source material that might end up deleted from hard drives or as electronic waste.

3. The Future

This presentation does not argue against archivists’ contemporary involvement in oral history, but I believe that Alexander Freund might have overlooked librarians’ potential in the field. He might be speaking from an outdated model of a library being a repository of secondary sources. Librarian and writer Barbara Fister argues that “[s]kills that helped librarians bring the world of knowledge to the local community are now being reexamined and retrofitted to support the processes of creating knowledge locally” (Fister, 2015, p. 69). This involves a shifting perspective from information brokerage to collaboration in knowledge creation.

I have personally experienced the changing mission of libraries. I graduated from library school in 1993, when the internet consisted solely of networked military bases and research institutions. In the early 1990s, lineups at reference desks were commonplace, and cadres of subject librarians responded to questions all day long. We consulted print reference books, card indexes, and newspaper clippings to help the public locate poetry quotations, recipes, rare book values, stock prices, and sports team statistics. We relayed a whole universe of information that is now easily findable on our phones. As home computing surged in popularity in the mid 1990s, by 1996, reference questions began a steep and permanent decline (Ashe, 2003).

Today, the positions for academic and public librarians with specialized subject expertise are declining (Triumph & Beile, 2015), replaced by an increase in postings that require expertise in specific library functions. These positions include community outreach, digital collections and curation, and makerspaces. These roles allow us to support and engage in local knowledge creation, including oral histories. Librarians in British Columbia are spearheading oral history projects, as well as providing infrastructure, equipment, and digital platforms for their communities.

Librarians: spearheading and supporting oral history

I sometimes wonder where librarians were while Canadian archivists were engaging in and debating their involvement with oral history, but that is the topic for future research. We were probably busy answering reference questions, or we may have just been sleeping at the switch. In any case, I can attest that some of us in the southwest corner of British Columbia have woken up to what oral history has to offer as content rich additions to our collections and meaningful outreach efforts. I caught the oral history bug with an institutional history, the [TechBC Memory Project](#), where I conducted thirty interviews of past students and employees who experienced the rise and fall of a short-lived public university (Hendrigan, 2016b). The Vancouver Public Library interviewed members of [Vancouver's Chinatown community](#) and combined the audio with historical images in a curated, multilingual collection (Vancouver Public Library, 2016). Kathleen Reed is a librarian at Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo, British Columbia. She recently received a grant to record and preserve Nanaimo's LGBTQ2 history (personal communication).

In addition to taking the lead on oral history projects, librarians are supporting the technological and spatial needs of researchers. Public and academic libraries are increasingly investing in equipment and makerspaces, which provide all community members access to these essential devices and spaces (Barniskis, 2016). I borrowed a recorder, microphone and microphone stand from my Library's collection for my interviews. Nicolas Kenny's undergraduate History class at SFU used VPL's equipment in its [Inspiration Lab](#) (Vancouver Public Library, 2017) to record podcasts that accompanied their [historical walking tour of Vancouver](#) (Kenny, 2015).

Academic libraries also enable its scholars to deposit their research outputs in digital platforms. They manage institutional repositories, which are a quick and easy means of storing audio files, summaries and transcripts. I originally uploaded my audio files to Summit, SFU's institutional repository; other SFU projects, such as [\(Re\)Claiming the New Westminster Waterfront](#), a labour history of a riverfront suburb near Vancouver, are preserved there as well (Hall, 2015). Libraries also provide digital collections platforms with enhanced aesthetics and functionality.

Some libraries are central to Digital Humanities and digitization initiatives on campus. SFU is piloting a 3-year program which funds a web developer and two research assistants for a [Digital Humanities Innovation Lab](#) within the Library. This support allowed me to migrate my interviews to the Islandora platform; I uploaded enhanced metadata, images, and transcripts for each interview, and integrated OHMS indexing with the audio file. SFU Library Digitization Grants funded my transcriptions and indexing assistance. This grant has also funded transcriptions of indigenous rodeo participants, and the digitization of the Japanese Canadian Oral History Collection (Simon Fraser University Library, 2017).

I acknowledge Freund's reservations about uploading oral histories to the internet, and how vitally important informed consent is in this process. Archives and not libraries are the appropriate institution to handle interviews with restricted access. I also experienced first hand how time consuming metadata work is, and understand the the extraordinary pressures academics face with teaching, research, and service commitments. But I still think it is important to make interviews discoverable on the Internet, which is today's primary communications medium.

Conclusion

To conclude, archivists led the discussions about oral history in Canada in the early days of the field; they brought together Canadian academics and

broadcasters, created an invaluable inventory of oral history collections, and even ventured out in the field. But changing patterns in government funding and archival practice contributed to a more passive approach to oral history among archivists that we see in Canada today. While oral history methods in Canada have flourished, I worry that our preservation efforts have stalled.

Libraries have a lot to offer oral history practice as lead investigators and back end supporters. But we have work to do on two fronts: first, communicate our enthusiasm for oral history among ourselves. Be vocal about our projects and our potential. I'm seeing glimmers of hope at OHA meetings where librarians have begun an informal network; [four of us were on a panel](#) just prior to this session. However, we must also leave our own silos, enter academic spaces such as conferences and journals, and make ourselves known. We must begin conversations about collaboration and preservation.

In the spirit of putting my money where my mouth is, I have committed to serving on the COHA executive for the next three years. We have ambitious plans to organize future conferences and continue publishing Oral History Forum. I hope that one day soon, when asked who is in the room at the OHA keynote, librarians will be named along with our archivist colleagues. Thank you.

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